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ABSTRACT

In response to growing levels of violence in American schools, many communities are deciding to adopt school-uniform policies as part of an overall program to improve school safety and discipline. This document provides the following guidelines for parents, teachers, and school leaders who may consider adopting a school-uniform policy: (1) Get parents involved from the beginning; (2) protect students' religious expression; (3) protect students' other rights of expression; (4) determine whether to implement a voluntary or mandatory policy; (5) consider whether to have an opt-out provision in the case of a mandatory policy; (6) do not require students to wear a message; (7) assist families that need financial help; and (8) treat school uniforms as part of an overall safety program. Proponents assert that school uniforms may decrease violence and theft among students over clothing; prevent the wearing of gang colors and insignia; instill student discipline; help students and parents resist peer pressure; help students focus on school work; and help school officials identify intruders. The document also highlights policy models implemented in schools in the following communities: Long Beach, California; Seattle, Washington; Richmond, Virginia; Kansas City, Missouri; Memphis, Tennessee; Baltimore, Maryland; Norfolk, Virginia; and Phoenix, Arizona. (LMI)

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Manual on School Uniforms

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School Uniforms: Where They Are and Why They Work

A safe and disciplined learning environment is the first requirement of a good school. Young people who are safe and secure, who learn basic American values and the essentials of good citizenship, are better students. In response to growing levels of violence in our schools, many parents, teachers, and school officials have come to see school uniforms as one positive and creative way to reduce discipline problems and increase school safety.

They observed that the adoption of school uniform policies can promote school safety, improve discipline, and enhance the learning environment. The potential benefits of school uniforms include:

- *decreasing violence and theft — even life-threatening situations — among students over designer clothing or expensive sneakers;*
- *helping prevent gang members from wearing gang colors and insignia at school;*
- *instilling students with discipline;*
- *helping parents and students resist peer pressure;*
- *helping students concentrate on their school work; and*
- *helping school officials recognize intruders who come to the school.*

As a result, many local communities are deciding to adopt school uniform policies as part of an overall program to improve school safety and discipline. California, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, New York, Tennessee, Utah and Virginia have enacted school uniform regulations. Many large public school systems — including Baltimore, Cincinnati, Dayton, Detroit, Los Angeles, Long Beach, Miami, Memphis, Milwaukee, Nashville, New Orleans, Phoenix, Seattle and St. Louis — have schools with either voluntary or mandatory uniform policies, mostly in elementary and middle schools. In addition, many private and parochial schools have required uniforms for a number of years. Still other schools have implemented dress codes to encourage a safe environment by, for example, prohibiting clothes with certain language or gang colors.

Users' Guide to Adopting a School Uniform Policy

The decision whether to adopt a uniform policy is made by states, local school districts, and schools. For uniforms to be a success, as with all other school initiatives, parents must be involved. The following information is provided to assist parents, teachers, and school leaders in determining whether to adopt a school uniform policy.

1. *Get parents involved from the beginning*

Parental support of a uniform policy is critical for success. Indeed, the strongest push for school uniforms in recent years has come from parent groups who want better discipline in their children's schools. Parent groups have actively lobbied schools to create uniform policies and have often led school task forces that have drawn up uniform guidelines. Many schools that have successfully created a uniform policy survey parents first to gauge support for school uniform requirements and then seek parental input in designing the uniform. Parent support is also essential in encouraging students to wear the uniform.

2. ***Protect students' religious expression***

A school uniform policy must accommodate students whose religious beliefs are substantially burdened by a uniform requirement. As U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley stated in **Religious Expression in Public Schools**, a guide he sent to superintendents throughout the nation on August 10, 1995:

> Students may display religious messages on items of clothing to the same extent that they are permitted to display other comparable messages. Religious messages may not be singled out for suppression, but rather are subject to the same rules as generally apply to comparable messages. When wearing particular attire, such as yarmulkes and head scarves, during the school day is part of students' religious practice, under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act schools generally may not prohibit the wearing of such items.

3. ***Protect students' other rights of expression***

A uniform policy may not prohibit students from wearing or displaying expressive items — for example, a button that supports a political candidate — so long as such items do not independently contribute to disruption by substantially interfering with discipline or with the rights of others. Thus, for example, a uniform policy may prohibit students from wearing a button bearing a gang insignia. A uniform policy may also prohibit items that undermine the integrity of the uniform, notwithstanding their expressive nature, such as a sweatshirt that bears a political message but also covers or replaces the type of shirt required by the uniform policy.

4. ***Determine whether to have a voluntary or mandatory school uniform policy***

Some schools have adopted wholly voluntary school uniform policies which permit students freely to choose whether and under what circumstances they will wear the school uniform. Alternatively, some schools have determined that it is both warranted and more effective to adopt a mandatory uniform policy.

5. ***When a mandatory school uniform policy is adopted, determine whether to have an opt out provision***

In most cases, school districts with mandatory policies allow students, normally with parental consent, to opt out of the school uniform requirements.

Some schools have determined, however, that a mandatory policy with no opt out provision is necessary to address a disruptive atmosphere. A Phoenix, Arizona school, for example, adopted a mandatory policy requiring students to wear school uniforms, or in the alternative attend another public school. That Phoenix school uniform policy was recently upheld by a state trial court in Arizona. Note that in the absence of a finding that disruption of the learning environment has reached a point that other, lesser measures have been or would be ineffective, a mandatory school uniform policy without an opt out provision could be vulnerable to legal challenge.

6. ***Do not require students to wear a message***

Schools should not impose a form of expression on students by requiring them to wear uniforms bearing a substantive message, such as a political message.

7. *Assist families that need financial help*

In many cases, school uniforms are less expensive than the clothing that students typically wear to school. Nonetheless, the cost of purchasing a uniform may be a burden on some families. School districts with uniform policies should make provisions for students whose families are unable to afford uniforms. Many have done so. Examples of the types of assistance include: (a) the school district provides uniforms to students who cannot afford to purchase them; (b) community and business leaders provide uniforms or contribute financial support for uniforms; (c) school parents work together to make uniforms available for economically disadvantaged students; and (d) used uniforms from graduates are made available to incoming students.

8. *Treat school uniforms as part of an overall safety program*

Uniforms by themselves cannot solve all of the problems of school discipline, but they can be one positive contributing factor to discipline and safety. Other initiatives that many schools have used in conjunction with uniforms to address specific problems in their community include aggressive truancy reduction initiatives, drug prevention efforts, student-athlete drug testing, community efforts to limit gangs, a zero tolerance policy for weapons, character education classes, and conflict resolution programs. Working with parents, teachers, students, and principals can make a uniform policy part of a strong overall safety program, one that is broadly supported in the community.

Model School Uniform Policies

States and local school districts must decide how they will ensure a safe and disciplined learning environment. Below are some examples of school districts that have adopted school uniforms as part of their strategy.

Long Beach, California

Type: Uniforms are mandatory in all elementary and middle schools. Each school in the district determines the uniform its students will wear.

Opt-out: Yes, with parental consent

Size of program: 58,500 elementary and middle school students

Implementation date: 1994

Support for disadvantaged students: Each school must develop an assistance plan for families that cannot afford to buy uniforms. In most cases, graduating students either donate or sell used uniforms to needy families.

Results: District officials found that in the year following implementation of the school uniform policy, overall school crime decreased 36 percent, fights decreased 51 percent, sex offenses decreased 74 percent, weapons offenses decreased 50 percent, assault and battery offenses decreased 34 percent, and vandalism decreased 18 percent. Fewer than one percent of the students have elected to opt out of the uniform policy.

Dick Van Der Laan of the Long Beach Unified School District explained, "We can't attribute the improvement exclusively to school uniforms, but we think it's more than coincidental." According to Long Beach police chief William Ellis, "Schools have fewer reasons to call the police. There's less conflict among students. Students concentrate more on education, not on who's wearing $100 shoes or gang attire."

Seattle, Washington

Type: Mandatory uniform policy at South Shore Middle School

Opt-out: Yes, with parental consent. Students who opt out must attend another middle school in the district.

Size of program: 900 middle school students

Implementation date: 1995

Support for disadvantaged students: South Shore works with local businesses that contribute financial support to the uniform program. In addition, the administration at South Shore found that the average cost of clothing a child in a school with a prescribed wardrobe is less than in schools without such a program, sometimes 80 percent less. School officials believe that durability, reusability and year-to-year consistency also increase the economy of the school's plan.

Results: The principal of South Shore, Dr. John German, reports that "this year the demeanor in the school has improved 98 percent, truancy and tardies are down, and we have not had one reported incident of theft." Dr. German explains that he began the uniform program because his students were "draggin', saggin' and laggin'. I needed to keep them on an academic focus. My kids were really into what others were wearing." Only five students have elected to attend another public school.

Richmord, Virginia

Type: Voluntary uniform policy at Maymont Elementary School for the Arts and Humanities

Opt-out: Uniforms are voluntary.

Size of program: 262 elementary school students

Implementation date: 1994

Support for disadvantaged students: Responding to parent concerns about the cost of uniforms, the school sought community financial support for the uniform program. Largely as a result of financial donations from businesses and other community leaders, the percentage of students wearing uniforms rose from 30 percent in 1994-95, the first year of the program, to 85 percent during the current year.

Results: Maymont principal Sylvia Richardson identifies many benefits of the uniform program, including improved behavior, an increase in attendance rates and higher student achievement.

Kansas City, Missouri

Type: Mandatory uniform policy at George Washington Carver Elementary School

Opt-out: None. Carver is a magnet school to which parents and students apply knowing about the uniform policy.

Size of program: 320 elementary school students

Implementation date: 1990

Support for disadvantaged students: Students receive their uniforms at no cost to them. The state and school district pay for the uniforms primarily with magnet school funding.

Results: Philomina Harshaw, the principal for all six years that Carver has had uniforms, observed a new sense of calmness throughout the school after students began wearing uniforms. "The children feel good about themselves as school uniforms build a sense of pride. It forces adults to know a child."

Memphis, Tennessee

Type: Voluntary uniform policy at Douglas Elementary School

Opt-out: Uniforms are voluntary.

Size of program: 532 elementary school students

Implementation date: 1993

Support for disadvantaged students: Douglas has business partners in Memphis that have contributed financial support to purchase uniforms for needy families.

Results: According to Guidance Counselor Sharon Carter, "The tone of the school is different. There's not the competitiveness, especially in grades, 4, 5, and 6, about who's wearing what." Ninety percent of the students have elected to wear uniforms on school uniform days, Monday through Thursday. Fridays are "casual" days during which none of the students wear uniforms.

Baltimore, Maryland

Type: Voluntary uniform policy at Mt. Royal Elementary/Middle School

Opt-out: Uniforms are voluntary.

Size of program: 950 elementary and middle school students

Implementation date: 1989

Support for disadvantaged students: Mt. Royal Elementary/Middle School keeps a store of uniforms that are provided free to students who cannot afford the $35.00 to purchase them. Ninety-eight percent of graduating eighth graders donate their uniforms to the school.

Results: According to Mt. Royal's assistant principal, Rhonda Thompson, the uniform policy "has enhanced the tone and climate of our building. It brings about a sense of seriousness about work." All of the students have elected to participate in the uniform program.

Norfolk, Virginia

Type: Mandatory uniform policy at Ruffner Middle School

Opt-out: None. Students who come to school without a uniform are subject to in-school detention.

Size of program: 977 middle school students

Implementation date: 1995

Support for disadvantaged students: The school provides uniforms for students who cannot afford them.

Results: Using U.S. Department of Education software to track discipline data, Ruffner has noted improvements in students' behavior. Leaving class without permission is down 47 percent, throwing objects is down 68 percent and fighting has decreased by 38 percent. Staff attribute these changes in part to the uniform code.

Phoenix, Arizona

Type: Mandatory uniform policy at Phoenix Preparatory Academy

Opt-out: Yes, with parental consent. Students who opt out must attend another middle school in the district.

Size of program: 1,174 middle school students

Implementation date: 1995

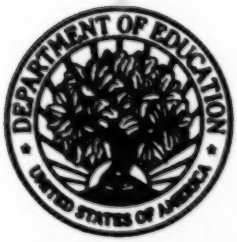
Support for disadvantaged students: A grant from a local foundation covers the $25 to $30 cost of uniforms for families that cannot afford to buy them.

Results: According to the principal, Ramon Legba, "The main result is an overall improvement in the school climate and a greater focus on positive behavior. A big portion of that is from uniforms."

For More Information

If you have questions about school programs with uniforms, please call the U.S. Department of Education Safe and Drug Free Schools office at 1-800-624-0100.

Prepared by the U.S. Department of Education in consultation with local communities and the U.S. Department of Justice.



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